Tufan Minnullin

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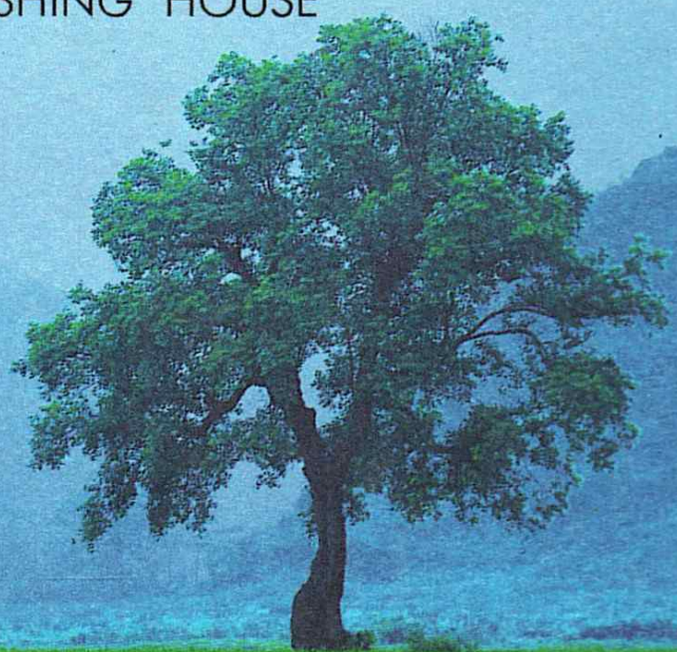
Альмандар из Альдермеша

MAGARIF PUBLISHING HOUSE



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KAZAN
MAGARIF PUBLISHING HOUSE
2005

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Translated by *Alexei Sakharov*

ISBN 5-7761-1508-6

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Tufan Minnullin

Almandar from Aldermesh

Comedy in 2 acts, 4 scenes with prologue, interlude and epilogue

To aksakals[1] of my native village who have seen a lot and experienced a lot in their lifetime, but did not loose zest for life, I dedicate this work.

CHARACTERS:

Almandar, an old man from the village of Aldermesh, 91 years old

Iskandar, the elder son of Almandar, 70 years old

Ommia, wife of Iskandar, daughter-in-law of Almandar, 65 years old

Hamdebanu, an old woman from the village of Aldermesh, 70 years old

Evstigney, a friend of Almandar from the neighbouring village of Antonovka, 85 years old

Gulfira, great-granddaughter of Almandar, 17 years old

Yuzumbike, wife of Almandar, the audience sees her at the age of Gulfira

Ilsur, a boy from the village of Aldermesh, 5-6 years old

Mansur, a lad from the village of Aldermesh, 18 years old

Azrail — Angel of Death, age is unknown, but looks quite old

Messenger of Death, he is also not young

Secretary to Angel of Death

[1] *Aksakal* (Tatar), an old man.

PROLOGUE

The curtain is raised. Lights show the next curtain. It contains a map of hemispheres of the Earth. The Messenger of Death stands by the map with a ruler in his hands. He murmurs some strange melody. The Messenger of Death tries to find the village of Aldermesh on the map. Having lost hope to find it, he takes a phone from his pocket.

Angel of Death (by phone): It's you? Come in.

Secretary comes in.

Secretary: Yes, Mr. Azrail.

Angel of Death (points to the map): What's this?

Secretary: Map of the Earth.

Angel of Death: So, where is the village of Aldermesh then?

Secretary (looking for Aldermesh on the map): Aldermesh... Aldermesh... Aldermesh... Is it a town or a village?

Angel of Death: Village. Some fifty houses, perhaps.

Secretary: Aldermesh... Aldermesh... This village should be somewhere in the East of Europe or West of Asia. Aldermesh... Aldermesh... Here it is! Here's Aldermesh!

Angel of Death (shaking the ruler): Just look at it. Hidden somewhere... Go and bring me the Angel of Death number one thousand five hundred and fifty.

Secretary leaves. Some time later the Angel of Death comes in.

Messenger of Death: May I?

Angel of Death: Come in. What's good? How are you?

Messenger of Death: Bearable.

Angel of Death: Enough work? May be getting bored without business?

Messenger of Death: Nothing of the kind. No time to rest, you know.

Angel of Death: Go on a business trip, very urgently.

Messenger of Death: Where?

Angel of Death (pointing to Aldermesh on the map): There, to Aldermesh.

Messenger of Death: Who's there?

Angel of Death: An old man named Almandar.

Messenger of Death: Very bad?

Angel of Death: On the contrary, full of life.

Messenger of Death: Then why?

Angel of Death: I was studying the lists of people living on Earth. And I came across a list of people living in the village of Aldermesh. And what did I see there? From its very foundation none of them lived for over ninety years. Almandar is ninety-one. Just think of it, ninety-one! How dares he to live longer than the others? Who gave him the right to live longer than established without my permission? Go to Aldermesh right now. I give you half an hour. Almandar must be here.

Messenger of Death: Yes sir! The order must be fulfilled. Please, repeat what is his name?

Angel of Death: Almandar. Almandar from Aldermesh.

Messenger of Death: Where can I find his biography?

Angel of Death: Take the file from my secretary.

Messenger of Death: Good-bye, I go down to Aldermesh.

The lights go off.

1 ACT

1 SCENE

Almandar's yard in the village of Aldermesh. The audience can see a corner of his house and its side window. Workbench. Next to it lie the rough boards. By the fence stands a ladder that looks like a ramp. On the upper pace of the ladder is a swivel chair, from which he can survey the entire village. Near the house is a road with people passing by. The house, the fence and the ladder are brightly painted. All this has been made by hands of the old Almandar.

Almandar stands by the workbench and dresses the boards, singing:

Almandar: Grey crow — queen-bird,
You swore not to fly —
Well, it's your business. But I didn't swear
Not to look at beauties...

(*Reclines the dressed board to the workbench, comes to the window that faces the yard and shouts.*)

Hey, Who's there? Bring me tea!

(*Climbs the ladder and, having seated, continues to sing.*)

Grey crow — queen-bird,
At which oak you're singing?

(*The passers-by greet him. He answers their greetings with pleasure and starts conversations with some of them.*)

Alive, as you can see... Thank you, Saifulla. Why not sit a bit, that's what we can. Hurrying to work? Listen, Saifulla, if you meet the foreman Gabdrahman, tell him that he is a fool. Why? He offended me. He does not call me to work. Says, «You are old». He orders me to rest. Have a good day, Saifulla. May luck be with you in your deeds!

Grey crow — queen-bird...

Good, my dear child, very good. Granddad Almandar will dance at your wedding. You say you are not planning to get married? Do not say

so, my dear child... Going to the spring? Good-bye. May your road be good, may your life be as light and pure as spring water.

Grey crow — queen-bird...

(Having noticed someone in the street, turns his back to him.)

I shall not greet you. I am offended. So what if you studied at Kazan and became a foreman. If I had studied at Kazan... *(Turns sharply to the street.)* What did you say? Repair the sheep house? Thank you, Gabdrahman! Your study at Kazan was not in vain. A man of reason can be seen at once. Be always reasonable. *(Sings in a higher mood.)*

Grey crow — queen-bird...
At which oak you're singing?
If you don't want to sing, then I will —
I will choose a beautiful girl for myself.

(Having seen Hamdebanu in the street.) Hamdebanu... *(Descends the ladder hurriedly and opens a wicket.)*

Hamdebanu appears.

Hamdebanu: How's your health, uncle Almandar?

Almandar: Best of all, Hamdebanu. Where are you mincing?

Hamdebanu: I can run no longer. Just walking.

Almandar: Come to the yard, Hamdebanu. Let's sit and talk. (*Hamdebanu comes to the yard. Almandar locks the wicket.*) Make yourself comfortable. Have a seat.

Hamdebanu (*pointing to the boards*): Always busy? What are you making, uncle Almandar?

Almandar (*sliding his scull cap to the back of his head*): A dacha.

Hamdebanu: What?

Almandar: Dacha, Hamdebanu, dacha! I visited my granddaughter in Kazan, my great-granddaughter took me out of the city. They have a house there: knocked up of boards. They call it dacha.

Hamdebanu: Really? So, do you want to make the same?

Almandar: To build. It will be in the garden.

Hamdebanu: Your house is spacious. Don't you have enough room?

Almandar: Little. My daughter-in-law gets more and more wicked. The older, the more wicked. Bad luck for my son, oh, bad luck. His wife lives too long.

Hamdebanu: Don't say so, uncle Almandar, and you yourself, thanks Allah...

Almandar: What myself? Nothing like that... I am a man. What kind of man is it if he did not buried two wives in his lifetime?

Hamdebanu: Allah, forgive us...

Almandar: Don't be afraid, Hamdebanu. I said two, not three. You will live for a long time. What can we do? Yuzumbike and Fahrijamal lived for a short time in the land of the living. The first died when she was sixty, the other when she was seventy-four. You know it yourself. It was not my fault, they died a natural death... So, I wanted to tell you for a long time, Hamdebanu... Being alone is probably hard for you too... May be... Will you marry me?

Hamdebanu: Allah, forgive us...

Almandar: I will carry you in my arms. In summer, we will live in the garden, in the dacha.

Hamdebanu: How do you have the heart to say so? You speak nonsense, uncle Almandar. It is a sin to mock at a seventy years old woman!

Almandar: I didn't have a slightest intention to mock at you, Hamdebanu. It is no good for such a strong man to depend in everything on his daughter's-in-law moods...

Hamdebanu: Stop it, uncle Almandar. It seems you still didn't get old. All these years that I know you, you make people laugh.

Almandar: So, what have I done wrong?

Hamdebanu: I didn't say 'wrong'. I said 'make people laugh'.

Almandar: So what?

Hamdebanu: Nothing, but...

Almandar: Do not seek my drawbacks, Hamdebanu. You won't find anyone better than me anyway. Don't waste the time, Hamdebanu.

Curly, curly,
The wind blows the curls.
She will not say 'yes'
To tie the heart of a young man tighter.

Hamdebanu: Forgive us, Allah... Phooey, You should be ashamed of yourself! (*Stands up sharply and makes her way to the wicket.*) Invited me and started to mock at an old woman. (*Attempts to open the wicket.*) What happened to it?

Almandar: It's locked, Hamdebanu.

Hamdebanu: What?

Almandar: I said it's locked.

Hamdebanu: Open it!

Almandar: Why this shouting? Nobody compels you. It's not old times any longer. Everything is being settled by mutual agreement. Go, go wherever you wish... I thought it would be better for you... (*Opens the wicket and lets Hamdebanu out. Then mutters under his breath.*) Good oldie, stands firm.

Voice of Mansur: How do you do, granddad Almandar.

Almandar: Hi, come in.

Mansur comes in.

Mansur: I have no time. Granddad Almandar, has Gulfira come?

Almandar: Who's Gulfira?

Mansur: Don't laugh at me, granddad Almandar.

Almandar: I just wanted to laugh. If you don't say who's Gulfira, I won't answer you.

Mansur: Your granddaughter.

Almandar: Wrong. Great-granddaughter. Why do you need my great-granddaughter?

Mansur: What do you mean by 'why'? For no particular reason.

Almandar: Go away. If you need her for no particular reason, I won't talk to you.

Mansur: She didn't?

Almandar: Don't know.

Mansur: Tell me, granddad Almandar.

Almandar: And you tell me why you need her. Say, I love her, you, blunderer. No, she has not come yet. When she comes, I'll tell you.

Mansur: Good-bye, granddad Almandar.

Almandar: Keep well. (*Closes the wicket behind Mansur and once again comes to the window.*) Hey! I say, hey! Are you sleeping? Bring me tea!

Getting no answer, he starts knocking on the glass. The window opens and Ommia appears.

Ommia: What happened?

Almandar: Have you all stuffed your ears with cotton wool? I've been calling you for half an hour, but you don't hear.

Ommia: Okay, okay, father, don't make noise. What do you need?

Almandar: What do you need... Tea!

Ommia: Samovar is on the table. Come in.

Almandar: Do you think I have enough time to sit with you by the table and drink tea for hours? I have a job to do.

Ommia: Who orders you to work? If it were something useful for the house then it would be good. But you just spoil the boards.

Almandar: Talking too much. You are my daughter-in-law and should know your place.

Ommia: Stop it. I've been keeping silent for forty years. A fool I was.

Almandar: All that you've stored up over forty years you've spoken over for ten years with interest. You dare! You know my temper, daughter-in-law...

Ommia: Temper... So, what would you do, then? (*Closes the window.*)

Almandar: Bad luck for my son, bad luck. Lived his life in vain. Yeah... The young years have passed. (*Comes to the workbench.*)

Ommia comes out of the house with a cup of tea.

Ommia: Where should I put it? How do you want your tea: with honey or jam?

Almandar: Put it here.

Ommia puts the cup onto the workbench.

Almandar: I sweat from honey, bring me sugar. (*Ommia goes.*) Came to reason. If you don't teach her some sense, she immediately shows her bad temper... (*Ommia brings sugar and goes to the house.*) Don't get lost or you won't hear me shouting! (*Having settled on the workbench, starts drinking tea.*) Whatever you may say, one cannot live without his wife. I remember, when I drank tea made by Yuzumbike I felt like I was flying for three days.

(*Behind the fence appears the dishevelled head of Ilsur.*)

Ilsur: Hi, granddad!

Almandar: A-a-ah... Ilsur has come. Come here, my friend.

Ilsur: No-o-o.

Almandar: Why?

Ilsur: You will feed me sweets.

Almandar: So what?

Ilsur: I eat them, and then my teeth start aching.

Almandar: Come in, I will not give you sweets.

(*Ilsur comes in and sits onto the workbench thriftily.*)

Well, Ilsur, my dear friend, let's shake hands. As men. (*Extends hand and Ilsur loudly claps his hand on Almandar's hand.*) That's right. And now let's wipe your nose. Good. You shouldn't be going sniffling. You are a big boy, girls will be laughing at you.

Ilsur: I wipe, but it keeps running.

Almandar: Well, have you learned any new songs?

Ilsur (*singing loudly*):

A willow grows on the bank
The willow needs clear water
If a lad is short
He needs a tall girl.

Almandar: Wonderful!

Ilsur (*singing even louder*):

White clothes do not suit
A dirty creature
Do not hurry to say I love you
If she does not like you!

Almandar: Good! More! More!

Ilsur: I don't know any more yet.

Almandar: Next time learn more, eh?

Ilsur: All right.

Almandar (*comes to the window*): Daughter-in-law! Hey, daughter-in-law, I'm talking to you!

Ommia (*opens the window*): What else happened?

Almandar: Give me honey... and a spoon.

Ommia: I'm dying! You've just said that you sweat from it.

Almandar: It's not for me.

Ommia (*having seen Ilsur*): There are many of them here. All village boys are in our yard.

Almandar: Do as I say...

Ommia: Now they want honey, they don't like sweets any more.

Almandar: His teeth are aching from sweets.

Ommia: His stomach will be aching from honey then.

Almandar: Talking too much!

Ommia: Father, think for yourself... (*Ommia disappears from the window and appears on the threshold with a spoonful of honey and gives it to Almandar. Almandar comes to Ilsur.*)

Almandar: Come, my friend, open your mouth wider.

Ilsur: Please, no.

Almandar: How come? Don't be so touchy... Be a man. Now, open your mouth. (*Ilsur opens his mouth. Almandar feeds him honey.*) Tasty?

Ilsur: Aha.

Almandar: Of course, aha. Now let's smear the remainders of honey around your mouth. If you simply eat honey it will not leave its taste in the mouth. But now you will be licking it off for a long time. (*Smears honey around Ilsur's mouth.*) Go, your friends are already waiting for you.

Ilsur: Thank you, granddad. (*Runs away licking his lips.*)

Ommia (*she was looking at the boy and Almandar from the window*): He is a child, and you are a child.

Almandar: It's better than be an old woman from cradle like you. You brought up seven children and still you don't like them. What is this world for without children? I have no more tea, bring me some tea

Ommia: I'm dying! When did you manage to drink everything? I'm not a waitress for you.

Almandar: Same old stew? Shorten your tongue, it's too long.

Ommia: Short or long, my tongue and I will do whatever I want.

Almandar: Your tongue is from shaitan[1].

Ommia: So what? You yourself is not a nightingale.

Almandar: Stop swearing at me. I am your father-in-law. You dare! You know my temper, daughter-in-law...

Ommia: Temper... So, what will you do then? (*Closes the window.*)

Almandar: Look at her. Chatters all the time. Has three words for every word. Bad luck for my son. If she were my wife... Ah, skip it, even if it were I, nothing would be different. My temper is easy. I touched neither my first nor my second wife even with finger.

Iskandar comes out of the house. He holds a cup of tea in his hand.

Iskandar: Aye-aye, father, you don't even give me a chance to lie a bit. Is it difficult for you to drink tea at home, by samovar.

Almandar: It is. I have no time to sit drinking tea for hours, forgetting about everything. You go and drink lying sideways.

Iskandar: You know I'm ill.

Almandar: You walking pip! At your age! Lying in bed at seventy!

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[1] Shaitan, evil spirit.

Iskandar (*gives the cup to Almandar*): I wish you saw what I had seen. (*Sits on the logs.*)

Almandar: What so peculiar have you seen?

Iskandar: I spent four years at war.

Almandar: Heh! And I had to feed your five small children over those four years. And they knew how to eat! They ate everything to the last drop. I was the head of the collective farm for three years and had to quarrel with chatterboxes like your wife. She alone is worth ten fascists. So what if you fought?

Iskandar: My whole body is covered with wounds...

Almandar: You fool. Sad sack, that is why you are all covered with wounds. You had a gun in your hands, but still wounded. During the Japanese War we had just bayonets, we were attacking, not hiding ourselves behind the gun, and still we have survived.

Iskandar: Right-oh! It's useless to argue with you.

Almandar: That's right! What else can be said, you have yourself to blame. You have convinced yourself that you are ill and slug in bed. Illness is always looking for those who is laid up, and is afraid of those who work,because it cannot catchhold of them and has to slip away. Go home, lie down, don't be an eyesore to me. Take the cups. Tell your wife to cook a meat soup for dinner, but let her cut the noodles herself.

Iskandar takes away the cups. Almandar follows him with his eyes.

Dirty dog Hitler. Mutilated such a hero. He would have never been lying in bed waiting for death. He is only seventy and has to sit and wait for Angel of Death to come and take him...

The wicket opens quietly and Angel of Death comes in.

Messenger of Death: Saliam Aleikum.

Almandar: So far Vagaleikum Saliam. Come in.

Messenger of Death: I have to. (*Comes closer to Almandar.*) Are you an old man named Almandar?

Almandar: Almandar is my name, but I didn't see an old man around. Who are you? I don't recognise you...

Messenger of Death: Let's shake hands, Almandar.

Almandar: I have no habit of shaking hands with a stranger.

Messenger of Death: I see. All right. Is anybody else in the yard?

Almandar: Why are you looking about like a spy? I have nothing to hide from people.

Messenger of Death: Don't hurry, Almandar. (*Speaks in a demanding voice.*) Answer me!

Almandar: As you can see, I am alone here.

Messenger of Death: Excellent. Come closer. Sit down. (*Sits down himself.*)

Almandar (*Does not come closer.*): Who are you?

Messenger of Death: I said, don't hurry. Sit down. (*Almandar does not move, and he comes to the old man himself.*) The fact is that, Almandar. (*Takes out a notepad from pocket and turns over its pages.*) So, your name is Almandar, your father's name was Jigangir, and your grandfather's name was Morathuja. If you want, I can name your ancestors down to seventh degree. Three days ago you became ninety-one. Married two times. To put it shortly, I have a very detailed information on you here.

Almandar: Fantastic... So, who are you?

Messenger of Death: You didn't extend your hand to me, Almandar, so now listen to me without hurry. Your grandfather died at forty, and your father died at forty-five. How did it happen that you reached the age of ninety-one?

Almandar: What business is that of yours?

Messenger of Death: I'm asking, it means it is my business, Almandar. Answer me!

Almandar: You know everything about me, you should know about this too. I wanted to live and that is why I lived. What does it matter to you?

Messenger of Death: Ha! Wanted to live! Everybody wants to live. But human beings are not immortal.

Almandar: Listen, go to hell with your talks. I have a lot of things to do, do not disturb me. (*Takes a plane in his hands.*)

Messenger of Death (*Takes the plane away from his hands.*): I'm not joking, Almandar. I cannot joke.

Almandar looks at Messenger of Death in amazement and, as if having recognised him, starts back.

Did you recognise me, Almandar?

Almandar: It seems that I have seen you somewhere.

Messenger of Death: You are right, Almandar. We met three times. This time is the fourth and final.

Almandar: Tell me at last, who are you?

Messenger of Death: I also recognised you at once. You've changed a bit, but still recognisable. The first time we met in 1905. It was the Japanese War. You were wounded and I came for you. But you did not want to obey me. We struggled for a long time. You were young, strong and you defeated me. I got angry, but there was nothing I could do and I had to stand back. Remember?

Almandar: No, I don't.

Messenger of Death: All right. Our second meeting took place in 1915. You fled from captivity. You were drowning in a swamp. I came for you. You said 'let me get out of the bog and take me'. I waited and you got out of it and ran away. You cheated me.

Almandar: You...

Messenger of Death: The third time was in 1930. Someone hit you with pitchforks for building collective farms. You were lying on a forest path. I came for you. But then appeared a man named Evstigney and took you out of my hands. Do you remember me now?

Almandar: Are you Angel of Death?

Messenger of Death: Exactly.

Almandar: Why did you come?

Messenger of Death: Why Angel of Death comes to people?

Almandar: I didn't call you.

Messenger of Death: You didn't call me the past three times either.

Almandar: But I'm not wounded, I'm safe and sound.

Messenger of Death: This time is different. You live longer than you were allowed. The most you had been given was ninety years. (*Takes out a paper.*) Sign here.

Almandar: What's this?

Messenger of Death: A notice. Come on, you are not the only one. Sign and you will go directly to my boss, Angel of Death — Azrail.

Almandar: Stop telling me lies.

Messenger of Death: I never cheat. Sign, I have little time. I have to fulfil the plan. This time you will not defeat me. I won't give you a chance to deceive me, and no one will help you. Sign.

Almandar: 'It's time', you say?

Messenger of Death: It is.

Almandar: All right. I'll think it over.

Messenger of Death: Don't say 'I'll think it over». Who are you? It's no use to argue with me. Tsars, thinkers, all signed such paper at their time.

Almandar: I have a lot of things to do yet...

Messenger of Death: No one could complete all deeds. It is impossible. What your descendants will do then? They will go mad doing nothing.

Almandar: So, you say 'it's time?

Messenger of Death: What a silly question. I'm telling you that I'm short of time. I have to visit million places.

Almandar: I see...

Ommia (*in the window*): Father, hurry up!

Messenger of Death: Who's that old woman?

Ommia: Iskandar feels bad! (*The window closes.*)

Messenger of Death: Who's that old woman?

Almandar: You know everything about me, you should also know her then.

Messenger of Death: Sorry, I didn't take interest in her so far.

Almandar: Daughter-in-law.

Messenger of Death: Iskandar is your son? Is he ill?

Almandar: It's probably because of you. (*Goes to the house. Messenger of Death follows him.*) And where are you going?

Messenger of Death: I'll have a look. May be my help is needed.

Almandar: Don't you dare to step into my house. You came to me, didn't you? So sit here until I come out.

Messenger of Death: All right, Almandar. Don't be late.

Almandar goes away. Messenger of Death goes around the house, looks at boards put by Almandar. Then he tiptoes to the window and attempts to see what is happening inside. Having heard a sound of an opening door, runs away from the window. Almandar comes out.

Messenger of Death: Well...

Almandar: What do you mean?

Messenger of Death: I mean how's your son, Iskandar?

Almandar: What can become of him? Healthy as a bull. I have raised a lazy-bones, who is always lying in bed slugging. And his wife is well matched for him, always shouting at every trifle.

Messenger of Death: Lie! I see it in your eyes that you lie!

Almandar: You see too much, going round here. You don't give me a chance to work. (*Comes to the workbench and gets busy with boards.*)

Messenger of Death: What are you doing? We have agreed with you!

Almandar: About what? We didn't! You were talking. I was listening.

Messenger of Death: You said 'wait for me until I come out'. Sign!

Almandar: I will, don't hurry. Here, hold this end of the board.

Messenger of Death: Don't talk to me like that! You shouldn't make me angry. My anger is terrible. I have no mercy to those who do not obey.

Almandar: Can't you see, I'm preparing!

Messenger of Death: No one saws boards before death.

Almandar: Fool! Do I need a fence around my tomb? Yes, I do. For this I have to plane the boards.

Messenger of Death: It makes it different. Go on, work faster.

Almandar: When you are ninety-one you can't do it faster. Hold that end of the board...

Messenger of Death: I came here not to get busy with boards.

Almandar: Then wait. (*Planes the boards and sings.*)

Red bird — grey crow,
You swore never to die
You swore, and I decided
Not to welcome Azrail.

Messenger of Death: What are you hinting at?

Almandar: No hints. It is just a song. (*Stops working.*) Can you sing?

Messenger of Death: Keep on working, don't stop. You said, 'I have little time'. I spend too much time on you.

Almandar: Don't hurry me, I'm a bit tired. A crow lives long. How can it be that man cannot live even as long as a crow can?

Messenger of Death: It is outside of my competence.

Almandar: Competence... But you have come to me uninvited.

Messenger of Death: Don't insult me, please.

Almandar: He is so well-mannered...

Messenger of Death: I urge you to continue planing the boards for the fence on your tomb.

Almandar: If you are in a hurry, do it yourself.

Messenger of Death: I'm not in this kind of business.

Almandar: You will learn fast.

Messenger of Death: What a loutish behaviour! Don't forget that it is me who came for you, not you for me!

Almandar: Nothing would happen to you if you work a bit. You have come for me, but I'm not afraid. Not at all. (*Keeps planing the boards.*)

Messenger of Death: Why are you doing it yourself? The others would do it when you die.

Almandar: I have always dome my work myself.

Messenger of Death: Well, I look at you... And...

Almandar: What «and»?

Messenger of Death: Well... Don't talk so... I saw many of your kind...

Almandar: And I saw you too.

Messenger of Death: Aha! I begin to like you, old man. Some start loosing themselves, when they see me and sign with their hands trembling. It is not even interesting. It's fun to be with you. All right, I will wait. Plane your boards properly.

Almandar: Go away, don't croak. Go have a walk in the street.

Messenger of Death: No, I won't go anywhere from here.

Almandar: What's the use of standing by the man who's busy, go and stand by someone who's pissing. It would be more interesting.

Messenger of Death (*laughs heartily with his mouth wide open*): Good! I didn't laugh like this for a long time. Stop it, Almandar, come here, sit next to me, make me laugh again.

The wicket opens and Gulfira comes in.

Gulfira: Granddad! I have come!

Almandar did not hear her.

Granddad! I've arrived!

Almandar (*turns to her*): Aye, my daughter has arrived. Come to me, embrace the old man.

Gulfira (*runs up to him and embraces Almandar*): I'm shouting to you, and you don't hear me.

Almandar: I was just talking.

Gulfira: Who's that?

Almandar: Well, some nasty old man.

Gulfira: Don't say so, granddad. You said yourself that we shouldn't use bad words to name people. Are you happy to see me, granddad?

Almandar: I don't know who is happier with your arrival.

Gulfira: You... I...

Almandar: And he too...

Gulfira: Are granddad and grandma at home?

Almandar: At home, daughter, at home. How are your parents?

Gulfira: Good. They asked me to give their regards to you. They also sent you a very beautiful shirt.

Almandar: Thank you, daughter. Go home.

Gulfira runs into the house.

Messenger of Death: Beautiful girl.

Almandar: You should not look at young people. You have enough old men, like us.

Messenger of Death: Almandar, would you mind if I tell you something clever?

Almandar: No need. I have my own mind. The clever things said by the others do not stay for long, the wind blows them away.

Messenger of Death: All right, as you wish. But what is interesting, Almandar, there are some who wait for me, call me, but I don't come to them. You did not wait for me, but I came. It's just as with people, the uninvited are never late.

Almandar: Stop chattering. Go to hell and mind your own business.

Messenger of Death: What do you man by 'go'? How should I understand it?

Almandar: Exactly as I said. I will not sign your paper. Let your Messenger of Death come himself.

Messenger of Death: It cannot be so.

Almandar: I'm short of time. I have to get married.

Messenger of Death (*laughing heartily*): Well, you are an odd fellow!

Almandar: What's so funny? If you want to know, two of my four sons who didn't come back from war did not even get married. I got married once for myself, the second time was for my one son, and now it is time to get married for the second one. And you, blunderer, ask for my soul.

Messenger of Death: Sorry, Almandar, I'm not asking, I demand.

Almandar: Do you think you've frightened me? Not even a moustache of Almandar stirred.

Messenger of Death: So, that's how you are talking now. (*Moves threateningly towards Almandar.*)

Almandar (*raising a board*): Just come closer and...

Messenger of Death (*stops*): If I didn't have pity for you the last time...

Almandar: You shouldn't have done that.

Messenger of Death: Come on, Almandar, think it over quietly...

Almandar: I'm short of time. Take those boards.

Messenger of Death: What shall we do?

Almandar: We shall carry the boards.

Messenger of Death: Where? Why?

Almandar: Don't ask me. You will see for yourself later.

Messenger of Death: I'm sunk.

The lights go off.

2 SCENE

Apple-tree garden. It is enclosed by latticed fence, along which runs a path. The passers-by greet Almandar. Almandar responds them. Almandar and Messenger of Death build a small house. Messenger of Death nails the boards. Almandar helps hold the board.

Almandar: Come on, Messenger of Death, come on.

Messenger of Death: Don't say so anymore.

Almandar: Don't say so, my dear, anymore
It tears my soul apart...

Don't hold the hammer like this, you fool, you will hit your finger. Do it like this. Now, pace.

(*Messenger of Death spikes the nails industriously.*)

Well, how is it now, my Angel, more convenient?

Messenger of Death: This is not a work.

Almandar: Got tired? Sweating your guts out? That's it! All right, have a break. Suppose what if you go to the better world instead of me. And I will have to answer for you.

Messenger of Death: I'm immortal. (*Having stopped working, starts philosophising.*) This is very bad, Almandar. Death is good. That is why

you, human beings, are so happy. What's the use of a billion years that I lived? They are not worth even one year of your lives. You build, you hope. I have no hope. I am a destroyer.

Almandar: Do not destroy. Who's forcing you?

Messenger of Death: That is how life is organised.

Almandar: All right, keep on spiking then.

Messenger of Death: Let's rest.

(*Makes himself comfortable.*)

Almandar: Will you still take me?

Messenger of Death: I have to, Almandar.

Almandar: Right now, eh?

Messenger of Death: Yes, Almandar.

Almandar: Can you wait a bit?

Messenger of Death: How long?

Almandar: Fifty years.

Messenger of Death: Don't joke, Almandar.

Almandar: Suddenly I feel it's so good to live.

Messenger of Death: Impossible.

Almandar: Ten years at least.

Messenger of Death: Impossible.

Almandar: One year.

Messenger of Death: I told you, Almandar, it's impossible. Impossible.

Almandar: A month, a week...

Messenger of Death: Don't ask for impossible.

Almandar: Don't you understand? I have grandsons, great-grandsons. They must be with me when I die, hear my advice for the last time. They are far away. They all have to be informed.

Messenger of Death: Send them a telegram, and they will immediately arrive today.

Almandar: It's easy for you to counsel. A telegram... Do you think they don't know themselves? They are at state service.

Messenger of Death: Working as ministers?

Almandar: Fool. It doesn't matter who they work as. They are needed at their place of work, they cannot be distracted from work so simply. I have to visit them myself.

Messenger of Death: Sorry, this will not happen. The only thing I can do for you is to give you the time to finish your tomb fence.

Almandar: You are bargaining as if you are at a market.

Messenger of Death: I have a lot of work to do, Almandar. My boss warned me: do it quickly. I can incur a penalty because of you. And I don't want it.

Almandar: So, why don't you go and finish other things. Come back after that.

Messenger of Death: To each his own, Almandar. Come on, let's get started. This time you spike the nails and I will hold the board.

Almandar: I see... Tell me, what will happen when a goat becomes six years old?

Messenger of Death: What a silly question. How a goat is related to all this?

Almandar: Just answer.

Messenger of Death: Why should I know? I have never kept goats.

Almandar: Then you should know that after a goat becomes six years old, she will be in her early seventh year.

Messenger of Death: Stop this nonsense.

Almandar: Come, spike.

(*Mansur comes to the fence.*)

Mansur: Granddad Almandar, has Gulfira come?

Almandar: Why do you need her?

Mansur: I love her, granddad Almandar.

Almandar: I see. No, she has not.

Mansur: I saw some girl entering your yard.

Almandar: My granddaughter is not «some girl».

Mansur: Has she come, granddad Almandar?

Almandar: Yes, she has.

(*Mansur runs away.*)

Messenger of Death: Who's that?

Almandar: Why are you asking about everybody you see?

Messenger of Death: Getting acquainted a little. May be it will be of use.

Almandar (*bringing his fist close to the nose of Messenger of Death*): Have you ever seen something like this?

Messenger of Death: I see.

Almandar: Then keep on working.

Messenger of Death: Can't I say a word? You made me a farm labourer.

Almandar: That's right. I have hired you. And I pay you with my life.

(*They start working and work for some time without saying a word.*)

Almandar: Tell me the truth, why should I sign this paper of yours?

Messenger of Death: I've told you already. You lived an extra year. You broke the law, which Messenger of Death has issued for your village.

Almandar: Even so?

Messenger of Death: Yes.

Almandar: All right, let it be. I broke the law you have invented. And does your Azrail know anything else?

Messenger of Death: Like what?

Almandar: I had five sons, real heroes. In 1941 they all went fighting. Four of them did not come back. The eldest was 36, the youngest was 20. If your boss Azrail does not allow the citizens of our village to live more than 90 years, why then he did not allow my sons live until 90?

Messenger of Death: It is outside of my competence, Almandar.

Almandar: Outside of your competence! Just press you a bit, and your competence disappears.

Messenger of Death: Human beings invented the war. They start it themselves.

Almandar: Not human beings, but thugs. Why doesn't your Azrail take lives of those who start the war?

Messenger of Death: He did.

Almandar: After they have spoiled so many lives. He should have screwed their heads off as soon as he has seen what they had been planning.

Messenger of Death: Don't dig too deep.

Almandar: Deep? All right, I will not. Go and tell your Messenger of Death that it is too early for Almandar to die. He has to live the lives of his four children, which is approximately one hundred and thirty years. But I am not greedy. Thirty or forty years will be enough for me. Come after that. Am I right?

Messenger of Death: From your point of view, you are probably right... But think it over, Almandar. What will be the use of these thirty years? Who needs you?

Almandar: Don't joke, Messenger of Death. You heard yourself what the head of the collective farm said when we met. He specially stopped when he was driving by in his car. He said, why, granddad Almandar, didn't you come to make hay and stack it?

Messenger of Death: He was smiling. You saw it yourself.

Almandar (*laughing*): I got you, Messenger of Death. If people smile when they meet me, it means they need me. They come from me elevated, they smile and the others smile to them in response. So many people smiling because of me. How can it be after that that no one needs me?

Messenger of Death: Decided to get married. Stop these tricks! Who will marry a ninety years old man?

Almandar: If you have a fiance, you will always find a bride.

Messenger of Death: All right, let's assume you will find a bride and get married. What's the interest?

Almandar: Heh, my friend. A married man has his own interest.

Messenger of Death: Bragging...

Almandar: Why not? A man brags and work gets along. I have something to boast. (*Spikes a nail with one hit.*) Let's sit and rest a bit.

Ilsur runs to the fence.

Ilsur: Hello, granddad.

Almandar: A-ah... Ilsur, come in.

Ilsur: No, a bee will bite me.

Almandar: Have you licked off your honey?

Ilsur: Yes.

Almandar: Come in, then. It will not touch you.

Ilsur: I don't want any more honey.

Almandar: What do you want then?

Ilsur: An apple. Give me three. One for Ildus and one for Rinat.

Almandar: Why don't they come in?

Ilsur: They are busy. Arranging goose fights by the pond.

Almandar: Wait, I'll be right back. (*Collects a full scull cap of apples and shakes them off into the lap of Ilsur's shirt.*)

Ilsur: Should I sing?

Almandar: You said you are in a hurry.

Ilsur: What are you building?

Almandar: Dacha.

Ilsur: Why?

Almandar: To sleep.

Ilsur: At night as well?

Almandar: Of course, at night. Who sleeps at daytime?

Ilsur: Not afraid?

Almandar: What should I be afraid of? Go, run, your friends must be waiting for you.

Ilsur: Thank you, granddad (*Runs away.*)

Almandar (*comes back to the building*): How can I go and leave these goslings? What shall they be doing without me? I have to teach them, give them in marriage...

Messenger of Death: They will forget you in a month.

Almandar: Will they?.. So be it. What can I do? Everyone has his own way. I can only wish them not to sweep away the others on it.

Messenger of Death: Listen, Almandar! You cheated me again. You said you were building a tomb fence, but you are building a dacha. And when asked why, you said «to sleep».

Almandar: Fool! What should I have said to a gosling, who does not know anything about death. How could I tell him about a tomb fence? And, don't interfere with my talks with children.

Messenger of Death: And, besides. Why are you doing it in the yard? There's a cemetery for such purposes.

Almandar: What people would think if I, alive, shall be installing a tomb fence at the cemetery? They will follow my example and start building their tombs. Why should I hurry them up?

Messenger of Death: You have an answer to every question.

Almandar: So, keep silent and don't ask questions.

Messenger of Death: Keep silent... What should I do with you? If I get angry, you will not even let a squeak. I don't why, but I don't want to get angry.

Almandar: Stop! Hamdebanu is coming. My future spouse. Step aside. Let me discuss everything with Hamdebanu quietly. I have to make it in my own way. Let her give consent. And, whether I will marry her or not is not so important.

Messenger of Death: Don't be a child. People will laugh at you.

Almandar: No, no one has ever laughed at me so far. I have never allowed considering my words as a joke. Women never laughed at me.

Messenger of Death: What if Hamdebanu agrees, will you sign the paper?

Almandar: We will see.

Messenger of Death: Swear, or I will be interfering.

Almandar: What a masher you are. All right. I will sign. Happy now?

Messenger of Death: Go, take your chance.

Hamdebanu appears near the fence. Almandar comes closer to her.

Almandar: Hamdebanu!

Hamdebanu does not answer and passes by.

Hamdebanu, are you angry with me?

Hamdebanu (*coming back*): How can I be not angry, uncle Almandar. How can I look into people's eyes after such words? I am ashamed of myself. I have not heard such words for thirty years. If it were someone else, he would surely have tested the taste of this stick!

Almandar: Why didn't you hit me then?

Hamdebanu: Though I didn't like your words, there is nothing bad in them.

Almandar: Thank you, Hamdebanu, for these words. They are so beautiful, you put it so well. Now, if you also agree to marry me...

Hamdebanu: You start it again...

Almandar: Don't be angry, Hamdebanu. You don't like my words, but I'm telling the truth. My wish is sincere. I'm saying it with all my heart...

Hamdebanu: Look, I'll hit you with this stick for these sincere wishes of yours...

Almandar: If you didn't hit me the first time, you will not do it now...

Hamdebanu: Don't try my patience...

Almandar: Just wait and you will agree, Hamdebanu. It is very difficult to live alone.

Hamdebanu: Thanks Allah. I don't have to go to people for a piece of bread. My pension is sufficient.

Almandar: They have spoiled old women with pensions. If you were hungry, you would run to Almandar yourself.

Hamdebanu: Don't mock at me.

Almandar: I'm not mocking, I pity you, Hamdebanu.

Hamdebanu: Don't pity me. I don't need your pity.

Almandar: Sometime you will want to be pitied, but it will be late. You already go on three feet. What if you get ill? Who will take care of you? It will be good if death will not be late, but what if you'll have to wait for it for a long time?

Hamdebanu: Don't intimidate me. People will not leave me alone. We don't live in a forest.

Ommia appears from the orchard. Having seen Almandar and Hamdebanu, she starts listening.

Almandar: What a stubborn woman you are. So, is this your final answer? Do you refuse to marry me?

Hamdebanu: I told you, don't say stupid things, uncle Almandar. You have always been molesting me. At first you tried to find me a match, now you want marry yourself. I thought you were joking, but it turns out that you are not.

Almandar: When you were younger, the younger men were your matches. But now even I would match. Think it over, Hamdebanu.

Hamdebanu: There is nothing to think over here. If you don't want to offend me, don't start speaking about it again. (*Goes away.*)

Almandar: If you decide positively, come. I will not run after you persuading. Think it over, Hamdebanu (*Looks where Hamdebanu has went, then shudders from voice of Ommia.*)

Ommia: Ee-ee-ee... Oh, Allah! I'm dying! I'm dying! What do you have on your mind?

Almandar: Stop shouting. You've been listening in?

Ommia: I'm dying! He shouts the entire street can hear him and he says that I was listening in. I was pondering what he's been sawing and planning, what he has on his mind. And it happens that he wants to get married and is building a house for himself. I'm dying!

Almandar: If you want, you may. I 'm not intended.

Ommia: I will go and tell everything to your son. I will tell everybody in the street, let them know who you are...

Almandar: Stop chattering.

Ommia: I will tell everything to Iskandar. (*Goes away.*).

Almandar (*shouting to her*): Daughter-in-law!

Messenger of Death: Have you seen it, Almandar?

Almandar: What do you mean? What are you so happy about?

Messenger of Death: They laugh at you, Almandar.

Almandar: They don't understand. That's why they are laughing.

Messenger of Death: There's nothing to understand here. Come on, sign the paper and we will go from here in an amicable way.

Almandar: Hamdebanu did not agree, you heard it yourself.

Messenger of Death: You will not hear her saying 'yes'. Don't hope for impossible.

Ommia, Gulfira and Iskandar come... Gulfira leads Iskandar arm-in-arm and is laughing without restraint.

Ommia: Look for yourselves. Ask him yourselves. Here, at this very place, he was singing as a nightingale.

Iskandar: Father, what' happening?

Almandar (*runs out towards Ommia*): I'm sick and tired of you, shrewish daughter-in-law!

Ommia: I'm dying! (*Hides herself from Almandar*).

Gulfira (*Embraces and stops Almandar who is running after Ommia.*): Granddad, stop, granddad, don't do it.

Almandar: Let me go, daughter, let me go. Your grandmother has become too impudent.

Gulfira: Don't do it. You are so clever, so good, granddad. Grandma is mistaken. Sit, calm down.

Ommia (*to Gulfira*): Why are you defending him? Who is mistaken?

Gulfira (*embraces Ommia*): No, grandma, you are not mistaken, and you are also right. (*Having seen that Almandar raises, runs to him.*) No, granddad, you are very good. You are all so good. I missed you all so much. Let us sit down all together.

Ommia: I don't want to sit. He is disgracing not only himself, but also all of us... I'm dying! He wants to get married.

Gulfira: What is wrong about it?

Iskandar: Daughter, it's not your business. You don't understand anything yet.

Gulfira: Why do you say that I don't understand? Granddad lives alone. What would be wrong if he gets married?

Ommia: Why alone? And what about us?

Gulfira: There are two of you. Granddad is your husband, and you are his wife. And granddad Almandar is all-alone.

Almandar: Thank you daughter, you understand. They are in their seventies, but still cannot understand this.

Iskandar: It is not so, father. You got married. After mother's death you lived alone less than ten years and got married again. Nobody told you a word.

Almandar: Who didn't say a word? Tell me that your wife was silent.

Ommia: I did not say anything. I was hiding my tongue and kept silent.

Almandar: You dinned it into ears of your husband. Do you think I didn't hear?

Iskandar: All right, it's all over and done with. But now, when you are hundred...

Almandar: Don't count my years.

Gulfira (*to Iskandar*): Granddad, you are wrong. Not hundred, but 'the one who has not reached hundred yet'. For you, granddad, it is really early to get married. Wait until you are hundred and then get married.

Ommia: Don't incite him. It's fun for you. I will write to your father that you incite your grandfather. We take care of him here, not you.

Iskandar: Let's speak quietly, father. With everything else in our house, all is as you want. You are the host here. And your daughter-in-law, Ommia... Doesn't she dance before you, listening to your every word?

Almandar: Oh yeah, you have a very, very obedient wife.

Iskandar: Don't get excited. We didn't say a word for your sawing the new boards and knocking this hut in the orchard.

Almandar: I wish I saw you prohibit it to me.

Iskandar: Would you listen to me until I finish?

Ommia: Iskandar is ill. Why are you bothering him?

Almandar: Don't interfere with the conversion between father and son.

Iskandar: Go, Ommia, go home, both of you. Let us two talk.

Ommia: Do you think he will listen to you? He does not consider you as a grown up man.

Gulfira giggles.

Why are you laughing all the time? You are not a little girl any longer. It's time you get clever.

Gulfira: But it's interesting.

Ommia: You want nothing but giggle.

Gulfira: Is that bad?

Ommia: Your grandfather has always been saying «it's interesting». Now look at what he's doing. It is interesting to him, but we feel ashamed. Let's go home.

Gulfira: No, I won't. I want to sit with granddad Almandar. Granddad, can I sit next to you?

Iskandar: Gulfira, you should listen to the old.

Gulfira: I wish I were old. May be you would listen to what I'm telling you then. Let's go, grandma. (*Takes Ommia at her elbow and they go away.*)

Iskandar: That's how it is, father.

Almandar: What do you mean?

Iskandar: Well, just that's how it is.

Almandar: You yourself don't know what you mean, son. Your wife says that I have always been looking for joy and something interesting, but she does not understand what it means. And you swear at me, together with her.

Iskandar: I don't swear at you, father.

Almandar: Go on, swear at me. I will not be offended. If your four brothers would have come back and swore at me, I would have been happy... How are you doing, son?

Iskandar: Nothing good. It's over.

Almandar (*changes suddenly*): Don't complain! Don't you dare to complain!

Iskandar: But you asked me how I am doing.

Almandar: Then say that you are all right. Sing! Dance! This is the true meaning of your «that's how it is». Imagine you complaining, me complaining, you whimpering and me following you, what would it be? (*Raises.*) Sit a bit.

Iskandar: Where are you going?

Almandar: I know where I'm going. (*Goes away and then returns with a bottle.*) Come closer, it is safer here.

Iskandar: Let's talk without it.

Almandar: I know what you will tell me. And you know what I will tell you. If we drink a bit of sour honey and sing together, it will be better for both of us. I have scraped the remains of honey from frames and left it to ferment. It should be mature now. (*Takes a tankard that hung on an apple-tree branch and sits down close to Iskandar.*) You can say whatever you want, but your wife is wicked. She does not allow me to place the bottle at home. What's wrong about it? It is a genuine honey. You know that I never brought vodka to the house. (*Pours the drink to the tankard.*) Come on, taste it.

Iskandar: It won't make my head heavier?

Almandar: If your father orders you, it won't.

Iskandar drinks a bit from the tankard and hands it over to Almandar. Almandar drinks the rest.

That's how it is, my son.

Iskandar: What do you mean?

Almandar: Don't hurry to die.

Iskandar: I don't hurry...

Almandar: You do. You have to live for your four brothers. It will be interesting when Messenger of Death comes to you and says 'Say farewell to life, Iskandar. You are ill'. And that sort of things. And you yourself agree because you think that it's better than suffer... Don't agree. You should deceive Azrail.

Iskandar: How can you deceive him?

Almandar: Do it. Deceive him. Messenger of Death comes to you because he thinks that it's your time. And you should behave as usual. While he is busy with you, he is late for other people. And the others live longer in this world because of you. That's how it is...

Red bird — grey crow,
At which oak you're singing?
You have accepted your fate,
I will not, don't even ask me.

Come on, son, let's sing together.

Iskandar: I can't.

Almandar: Sing!

Iskandar: Red bird — grey crow... No, I can't, father.

Almandar: You, over-boiled potato! Muff! (*After a pause.*) Heh, son... (*Takes off his waistcoat and puts it onto the ground.*) Come, lean on me.

Iskandar: I will go to the house.

Almandar: We didn't finish talking, son.

Iskandar: We did, father, that's enough. (*Tries to raise, but fails. Almandar tries to help him.*) No. I can manage alone. (*Raises with difficulty and goes to the house.*)

Almandar: Tell your wife to bring me some tea. (*Follows Iskandar with his eyes and sings under his breath.*)

Red bird — grey crow...

Messenger of Death: I see, Almandar.

Almandar: What do you see, Messenger of Death?

Messenger of Death: You have yourself revealed your secret. You keep cheating me. That's no good, Almandar. You return evil for good. In such case... Sign right now. Don't try to cheat me, old man, it won't help you.

Almandar: Stop shouting. Nobody tells you that I will not sign. Give me your paper.

Messenger of Death (*Takes the paper from his pocket and puts it in front of Almandar.*) Sign legibly.

Almandar: Where? Here?

Messenger of Death: Here.

Almandar: I can't write. That's the problem.

Messenger of Death: Don't try to cheat me. You worked as chairman of the collective farm.

Almandar: I did. But, my dear, it was the time when nobody paid attention to that.

Messenger of Death: Come, I will direct your hand.

Almandar: Don't touch me. I can write Almandar in Arabic. Wait a little. Let's drink some sour honey.

Messenger of Death: Let's not do it, Almandar.

Almandar: What can go wrong because of sour honey.

Messenger of Death: I know you. You offer sour honey, but at the same time you have something on your mind.

Almandar: No. Don't be so suspicious. Come, sit down. Don't stand as a scarecrow. (*Pours sour honey into tankard.*) Here, drink to my health.

Messenger of Death: No, no. First, I can't. Second, how can I drink to your health? I didn't come here to wish you health and many years of living.

Almandar: Then drink to my immortal soul. Quick, I have to sign the paper.

Messenger of Death: If so... (*Drinks sour honey from tankard.*)

Almandar: That's fine. (*Pours sour honey for himself and drinks.*) That's good. Well, did you like it?

Messenger of Death: If it were not good, you wouldn't have lived until ninety-one.

Almandar: Exactly. Let's drink another one. We won't see each other again to sit like this and speak. You will later recall this meeting and tell how we were sitting nicely.

Messenger of Death: Just a bit.

Almandar pours, and Messenger of Death drinks. Almandar pours himself and also drinks.

Almandar: Now we can talk.

Messenger of Death: Just as I said. You try to cheat me. You are at it again!

Almandar: Relax, Messenger of Death, my friend. You've been waiting for so long. Wait a bit longer. Would you mind if I sing to you?

Messenger of Death: But don't sing about the crow.

Almandar: You don't like the song?

Messenger of Death: It scares me.

Almandar: Aha. So, you can be scared. You, little fool, simply don't understand its meaning. Almandar has never sung to scare someone. All right, the hell with you, I will sing the other one.

I sing: byrdyi
Byrdyi, byrdyi and shyrdyi
I sing, but you don't like it
Then, try to sing something like this.

Well, what do you think?

Messenger of Death: It's OK.

Almandar: Listen, then.

I sing: byrdyi
Byrdyi, byrdyi and shyrdyi
I would have never sung shyrdyi,
But the listener is a fool.

You like it?

Messenger of Death: I, Almandar, right as I came to you, do you understand? I do everything as you say. You understand? But you mock at me all the time, understand? You laugh at me, understand? That's not right. That's not right, Almandar. Because I love you. If I don't like someone, then I waste no time for conversations. (*Almandar laughs loudly.*) Well, what are you laughing at? Why are you laughing?

Almandar: It's funny.

Messenger of Death: What's so funny? Tell me, what's so funny?

Almandar: Death. Death is funny.

Messenger of Death: There's nothing funny about it.

Almandar: It is funny. Man has climbed to the seventh heaven. He flew round the Earth. Man flies under the very nose of Messenger of Death and when he comes back to Earth, he dies because of some trifle. Isn't that funny? That's how it is...All right, I can do it, but the young ones, healthy and firm, they die too.

In an orchard, in a garden,
Walked a maiden...

Do you understand this «in an orchard, in a garden»? Do you know what's this? You don't. And I do.

Messenger of Death: I like you, Almandar. I swear, I wouldn't have touched you even with my finger... But what can I do? Come, Almandar, let me embrace and kiss you...

Almandar: We can do without it, Messenger of Death.

Messenger of Death: You don't like me, Almandar. I know. You treat me as enemy. Heh... (*Lies onto Almandar's waistcoat and falls asleep, snoring.*)

Almandar comes to him and, having made sure that Messenger of Death sleeps like a log, takes his waistcoat from under him and disappears.

Curtain falls.

2 ACT

Interlude

The stage is the same as in the Prologue. Angel of Death and his Secretary.

Angel of Death: Any news from Messenger of Death number 1550?

Secretary: No.

Angel of Death: Where the hell is he? It's twelve hours since he'd left and still there's no news from him. Almandar is still alive. What does that mean?

Secretary: I don't know. May be he cannot find the village of Aldermesh?

Angel of Death: That's stupid. He has a map of Earth in his pocket.

Secretary: But you also could not find Aldermesh on the map.

Angel of Death: Don't talk too much. Go and do your own business.

Secretary goes away and Almandar comes in.

Messenger of Death: May I?

Angel of Death: Ah, at last. Where's Almandar?

Messenger of Death (lowers his head): No.

Angel of Death: What do you mean by 'no'?

Messenger of Death: I pitied him.

Angel of Death: What?

Messenger of Death: I pitied him. He is a healthy, strong and wonderful man.

Angel of Death: Stop this nonsense.

Messenger of Death: It is not nonsense. It is simple truth.

Angel of Death (*rushing to Messenger of Death*): You! What were you doing there instead of bringing Almandar here? What's this? What's this?

(*A bell rings. Messenger of Death picks up a telephone from his pocket.*) Yes, speaking. Just a minute. You can't do even such thing without me. (*to Messenger of Death*) Stay here. Wait for me here. (*Goes away quickly.*)

Secretary comes in.

Secretary: Caught it?

Messenger of Death: A bit.

Secretary: Why late?

Messenger of Death: Don't interrogate me too.

Secretary: I know.

Messenger of Death: What do you know?

Secretary: You've lost Almandar.

Messenger of Death: How do you know?

Secretary: I know everything.

Messenger of Death: Where's Almandar?

Secretary: Should I tell you?

Messenger of Death: Stop mincing. You see my position.

Secretary: I see. I see a lot. And... And you will owe me. I was sorting the papers today and found a lot of interesting about you. The boss sent you for Almandar 70, 60 and 45 years ago. And you...

Messenger of Death: Be quiet.

Secretary: Don't be afraid. I didn't tell him.

Messenger of Death: You should have said.

Secretary: I'm not an informer. I respect you because you don't kowtow to Azrail.

Messenger of Death: Thank you. If so, tell me where's Almandar?

Secretary: In Antonovka. You will find him at the house of an old man named Evstigney.

Messenger of Death (*finds Antonovka on the map*): Look at where he's hidden himself, an old fox. Thank you. This time you will not escape, Almandar.

Secretary: You are so worrying about Almandar. Why?

Messenger of Death (*testily*): Worrying? Yes, I am. Don't I have the right for this? If you want to know, my dear, the world is built not only on death. I'm fed up! If I could, I would have changed places with Almandar. Who the hell we are, you and me? What's the use of our immortality? The only thing we can do is to bring grief, misfortune and tears.

Secretary: You've come back very different.

Messenger of Death: Unfortunately, I can't. I cannot change. If I could, I would never gave Almandar to boss.

Secretary: Almandar, Almandar. Who's he? A scientist? He made a great discovery? May be he's a popular singer?

Messenger of Death: No.

Secretary: Then, may be a football or ice hockey player?

Messenger of Death: No.

Secretary: May be...

Messenger of Death: No.

Secretary: Or...

Messenger of Death: No.

Secretary: So, who is he then? What so peculiar has he done?

Messenger of Death: Nothing special. He's an ordinary man. But I have never met a man who had valued life so much. Who loved it so much. Even in the hardest times he didn't loose the zest for life, elevated spirit. He brings joy to the people of his village. They look at him with hope. When they talk to him they forget about their problems. At least, for some time. They hope they too will reach the age of Almandar. Is this not enough? Heh, what else can I say? We don't understand much about it.

Secretary: Why should we understand? May be it's better not to understand.

Messenger of Death: May be. But still...

Secretary: Nevertheless, you should know that this time boss will not forget it.

Messenger of Death: Understood.

Secretary: He's coming... I respect you. That's why I decided to warn you. (*Goes away.*)

Angel of Death (*coming in*): Go to Aldermesh. Don't come back without Almandar. Otherwise I will punish you and you will never forget it!

Lights go off.

3 SCENE

Garden of an old man Evstigney in Antonovka. Evstigney is busy in his bee garden. Having heard Almandar calling him 'Yastegney', takes off the net.

Almandar (*he is not visible yet*): Yastegney!

Evstigney: Who's there?

Almandar: Do you know who's here? If you don't know, I will punch you.

Evstigney: Almandar?

Almandar (*steps out from behind the trees and speaks Russian with heavy Tatar accent*): You knew. I will not punch you. I came as guest. Give me tea, give me woman.

Evstigney (*putting aside the net and goes to Almandar*): Shaitan! How are you doing, Almandar! Good!

They great each other.

Almandar: Good! You good?

Evstigney: Good! Very good! Where did you come from?

Almandar: Village. My village. Have not seen you long.

Evstigney: Good! Very good! Come on, come here, sit down. I thought of visiting you. But now I'm busy with bees. Need Honey. Lots of honey. Do you have honey?

Almandar: A lot. Good year, rain, sun, many flowers, bees fly here and there, many of them. I fled from Messenger. Messenger slept, Almandar fled to Yastegney.

Evstigney: Messenger ? What Messenger ?

Almandar: Death. Came. Says, 'come on, old man. Come on, Almandar. Here-there, to die. I also, here-there. Fled to you. Shall sing together, shall meet women.

Evstigney (*laughing*): Joker. Good! Very good! We have honey, Almandar, we have Evstigney, we have an old woman.

Almandar: Don't give me old woman, I need young woman. I went for three versts[1]. If no young woman, I will run back.

Evstigney: No-o! Kunak[2]! Friend! Almandar!

Almandar: Know you for long. Know you well.

Evstigney: Come on, Almandar, come in the house.

Almandar: No house. Here is good. No old woman, no tea, no sour honey. I need a song. Let's sing a song. In an orchard, in a garden. Come on, Yastegney. (*sings*)

In an orchard, in a garden.

Come on, Yastegney.

Evstigney (*Sings. Almandar listens with pleasure.*)

In an orchard, in a garden.
There walked a maiden.
She is followed, she is followed
By a daring young man.
He carries after her, he carries after her
Rich gifts.

Almandar: Thank you, Yastegney. We lived well, didn't we? We lived the whole life with songs. We didn't give up. So many years together. Sixty years together. Just think of it. Heh. Neighbours, friends. Remember us dancing together at haymaking, and I embraced Maruchka from your village? Yuzumbika then swore at me, called me shameless. Also, remember when the whites have come to our region, we together have found the reds in the forest and went with them? And also, you have saved me from death, when we were building collective farms, remember, during the war...

Evstigney: Yes. Many things have happened.

Almandar: Few, Yastegney. Very few. I want to live so much, Yastegney. I wish I were fifty now. Life is so good, Yastegney. I don't want to go. Death has come to me. That's why I came to you. I came here on foot to say good-bye to you. Death has come.

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[1] Verst, Russian measure of length. 1 verst = 3500 ft.

[2] Kunak, a friend (Caucasian)

Evstigney: Don't talk rubbish, Almandar.

Almandar: It is not, I feel it. You know I never whined. I liked to live, and I lived with pleasure. I never gave up. I don't like weepers, and I don't want you to think that I came to weep. No, I don't complain. Even with Messenger of Death I talked jokingly.

Evstigney: That's right. I too never let the chance slip. We will live some more, Almandar.

Almandar: Yes. I was happy to see you in good health. How's your health, Yastegney?

Evstigney: Still young.

Almandar: Right! Stand firm! You are six years my junior.

Evstigney: Still a greenhorn.

Almandar: That's right. Exactly. Let's sing.

Evstigney (*sings*): Red bird — grey crow...

Almandar: That's right.

Red bird — grey crow
Why are you sitting on an oak?
If you don't know
Why you choose the top of the oak?

Remember, Yastegney, a certificate of death come for your Ivan and my Hairetdin? On the same day...

Evstigney: Yes.

Almandar: Let's go to us, Yastegney. Let Messenger of Death search for me. He will be searching for me, and we will have a good time... We will sit in my dacha. I have built a dacha in my orchard.

Evstigney: No, Almandar. You are my guest. You will stay for a night in my house.

Almandar: Your daughter-in-law will be angry.

Evstigney: No. My daughter-in-law is good. She loves you. Sit here a bit, I will tell her... (*Goes away.*)

Almandar takes on the net of Evstigney and goes to beehives, but suddenly looses his strength and stops. Messenger of Death appears.

Messenger of Death: That's how it is, Almandar. Fled from me?

Almandar (*takes the net off and sits onto ground*): I didn't even manage to think what happened, and it happened to be you.

Messenger of Death: It's me, your obedient servant. I told you that you would not escape from me. Let's go, Almandar. We are coming back to Aldermesh.

Almandar: Give me your paper. I will sign and get rid of you, the damned.

Messenger of Death: No. We will come back to Aldermesh first.

Almandar: Why is it so important for you?

Messenger of Death: You made me plane the boards and spike nails there. And we will cast accounts there as well.

Almandar: I don't have the strength for return.

Messenger of Death: Don't cheat me. Let's go, Almandar, in an amicable way. Let's not quarrel because of a trifle. Stand up. It makes no difference where you sign the paper. I'm doing my best for you. In your own house, in a hut that you have begun building for yourself...

Almandar: You think it would be better this way? All right. Let Yastegney go out. I will say good-bye to him.

Messenger of Death: May be better not do it?

Almandar: Why?

Messenger of Death: Why 'why'? Think for yourself. He is young. If he sees that you feel bad, he will get upset. You don't want people to get upset, don't you?

Almandar: That's right.

Messenger of Death: Stand up. Let's go slowly. It's not difficult for you to go for three versts, isn't it? For you to feel a bit easier, I will keep my distance from you.

Almandar (*stands up*): You sing too sweet this time.

Messenger of Death: Does it matter how I am talking? I was angry with you for your fleeing from me, but still I admire you. You must have courage to take a decision to go for three versts at ninety-one. Probably, you forgot that you would have to come back the same distance. Well,

how are you? Feeling better? May be you'd really better to wait for Evstigney to come out? He would help you to get a car to take you to your village.

Almandar: No. I don't like to disturb people. Let's go.

They leave the orchard slowly. Evstigney appears.

Evstigney: Almandar. Where are you? Still playing tricks? Joker.

Lights go off.

4 SCENE

Orchard of Almandar. On the floor of the incomplete hut sit Almandar and Messenger of Death. It's nighttime. There can be heard the sounds of a Tatar accordion and people singing.

Messenger of Death: Lie a bit, have some rest, Almandar. The road wore you down.

Almandar: Headful! Convincing me to have some rest to make me fall asleep forever?

Messenger of Death: Stop it. Who do you take me for? It's you who's cheating me all the time. I'm always telling you the truth. I will not touch you until you sign... I will be punished because of you. But still I present this last night to you.

Almandar: You have something on your mind.

Messenger of Death: Word of honour. I don't want to take you this night. You will go at dawn, in the beginning of the new day. Your soul has always been full of light and you have to go at daytime. So, tonight you can do whatever you want.

Almandar: Summer nights are so short. What can I do for this time?

Messenger of Death: Think of it. May be correct something, repent.

Almandar: No. I have never done anything I could repent for. Everything I had planned I have fulfilled. The only incomplete thing is this hut and... and... this world remains. Imperfect world. I would like to make it for everybody to feel good in it. Even if we cannot evade death, I wish people lived until my age and die a natural death. Didn't burn down.

Messenger of Death: Why are you so sad, Almandar? It was fun being with you, and suddenly you have faded away. Don't mope. Don't be down in the mouth. Stand up. Let's finish your hut.

Almandar: I don't want to make noise at night. It is not good. People are sleeping.

Messenger of Death: What should I do with you then?

Almandar: Give me your paper.

Messenger of Death: Almandar...

Almandar: Give it to me.

Messenger of Death: Why? I offer you...

Almandar: But remember. Don't boast that you defeated Almandar and made him sign. I sign myself.

Messenger of Death: Say good-bye to your son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter at least.

Almandar: Let them sleep.

Messenger of Death: All right. There's nothing to be done. But don't get offended then. (*Gives the paper and pencil to Almandar.*) Almandar, I wish you knew how I don't want to take you. Really, I want to help you so much. But I don't know how. (*Suddenly an idea strikes him.*). I've got an idea! I've got an idea, Almandar. You will live!

Almandar (*dropping the paper*): Tell it. Quickly!

Messenger of Death: Iskandar! Your son, Iskandar! The surname is the same, the names are similar. Boss will not see anything. I will do everything accurately. Iskandar longs for death anyway. I will run to him. Let him sign the paper.

Almandar (*jumping to his feet*): What are you talking about? What do you propose, evil-doer? My only son? (*pounces upon Messenger of Death*).

Messenger of Death: What are you doing? Let me go.

Almandar: What do you want me to do?

He grasps Messenger of Death. Messenger of Death resists. They wrestle and then fall to the ground having lost their strength. They roll on the ground and then, exhausted, sit back to back and rest.

Messenger of Death: One might think I do it for myself.

Almandar: Shut up!

Messenger of Death: I think of you. You said you want to live.

Almandar: A said 'shut up'!

Messenger of Death: All right. All right. Go to hell. Do as you want. You don't have the brains. The only thing you can do is to sing songs about the crow. If you want to know, crow is a mean bird.

Almandar: So what? It is also a living being.

Messenger of Death: Who needs it?

Almandar: If it lives in this world, then someone needs it.

A pause.

Messenger of Death: Sorry, Almandar. It was stupid to speak about Iskandar. I forgot I speak to Almandar. Heh, life... In an orchard, in a garden... Listen, Almandar. What about Evstigney? May be he would do?

Almandar turns quickly to Messenger of Death, and Messenger of Death looses balance and falls.

Almandar: Again?

Messenger of Death (*moving back*): All right, all right. No more. Don't be angry with me. (*Raises the paper from the ground.*) All right. Let it be as you want it. Everything as you want it. Here is the pencil.

Almandar takes the paper and the pencil. At the same moment Gulfira and Mansur come to the fence. Mansur does not come close to Gulfira and stands at a distance from Gulfira. Almandar forgets about the paper and begins listening to their conversation.

Mansur: Gulfira, why weren't you born in our village?

Gulfira: You ask such strange questions, Mansur.

Mansur: May I not?

Gulfira: What do you think?

Mansur: I don't think.

Gulfira: Think before asking such questions.

Mansur: It is always like this in the village. Nobody thinks before asking a question. It is in cities they are always thinking and thinking... One might think they are different from us. They have a pair of legs and we have a pair of legs too.

Gulfira: A hen also has a pair of legs, and a goose too.

Mansur (*laughing*): You can poke fun at people.

Almandar: Then, you do it too, muddler. Stop gaping around. A hero, but in other situations.

Messenger of Death: Wait, Almandar. Let's listen.

Almandar: Why are you so interested about a talk between a lad and a girl?

Messenger of Death: It is interesting. What will it come to?

Gulfira: Why have you left the games?

Mansur: You left too.

Gulfira: So what of it. My granddad Almandar said to me to be home before ten o'clock.

Almandar: Look at this puny person. She's cheating him and doesn't even blush.

Mansur: Granddad Almandar is not at home. I saw him going to Antonovka. He usually comes back from there in two or three days.

Almandar: Good boy!

Mansur: He told me 'your Gulfira has come'.

Gulfira: What does it mean 'your'?

Almandar: Heh, you missed, boy.

Messenger of Death: Quiet!

Almandar: I can't be quiet. This is my great-granddaughter.

Mansur: I don't know. That is what granddad Almandar said.

Gulfira: He will pay for that. All right, Mansur, good-bye. I have to go. I want to sleep.

Mansur: When speaking to a young man, a girl should not say that she wants to sleep.

Gulfira: Why?

Mansur: This is not good. This is not cultural. Village girls don't speak like that.

Gulfira: Then go to village girls.

Mansur: Why are you talking with a jeer?

Gulfira: Stop molesting me. Every time I come, you molest me.

Mansur: Because I want to talk with you. That is why I wait so much for your arrival.

Gulfira: May be you even think of saying that you love me?

Mansur: No, I don't. Why should I think to say 'I love'? One should think before saying 'I don't love'.

Gulfira: Why?

Almandar: They speak very different. Not as it was at my time. The talk is pleasant.

Messenger of Death: What's so pleasant? Here-there.

Almandar: That's the point. At my time only we, the guys, spoke. Women loosened their tongues only ten years after marriage. At night they used to move aside,to the edge of bed. What is the joy to embrace a woman that fears you? Let her slide into your arms herself. Even if she would swear at you a bit.

Messenger of Death: Old rake you are, Almandar.

Almandar: Why not?

Gulfira: Why? Say something. Don't be silent.

Mansur: I will, if you will be addressing me as a friend.

Gulfira: But you first started speaking as if we were not introduced.

Mansur: I wanted it to be in a cultural way...

Gulfira (*laughing*): I'm dying! You will make me die of laughing.

Mansur: That's how it is, Gulfira. There is no need to think before saying «I love» because you say what you have in your heart. But you should think well before saying «I don't love». Because you can be mistaken. But if you say «I don't love», to say «I love» would be more difficult.

Gulfira: You can be mistaken if you say «I love».

Mansur: Heart cannot be mistaken.

Gulfira: Thank you for the lecture. I will remember it. When will you join the army?

Mansur: Why do you ask me of that?

Gulfira: I would walk freely about the village then.

Mansur: You will get rid of me this year. But in two years I will meet you again.

Gulfira: In two years I will not be coming to the village.

Mansur: Where will you be going then?

Gulfira: This year I will enter a university. When I become a student I will be going with student teams in summer.

Mansur: Are you sure you will enter a university?

Gulfira: I'm not like you. I have only excellent marks.

Almandar: She's like me. Likes to boast a bit. That's right, my girl. Don't surrender. Your granddad never let the chance to slip.

Mansur: You, Gulfira, ask when you will get rid of me, but when you see me you are glad.

Gulfira: How do you know?

Mansur: Mansur feels it. You also come to village because of me.

Gulfira: This is not true.

Mansur: Don't hurry to say that it is not, Gulfira. Some day you will have to admit that it is.

Gulfira: Look at him!

Mansur: That's what I am. I was shy before. But now... I will join the army soon. They don't like shy guys there. Don't be offended with me when I say that you come here because of me. There's nothing to be offended for. I also wait for you to come. I miss you. And you feel that I miss you too.

Gulfira: I'm dying!

Mansur: I said it is a pity that you were born not in our village.

Gulfira: I remember.

Mansur: If you were born in our village, if you grew up here, we would have always been together then. You would have embroidered a handkerchief for me before I joined the army...

Gulfira: I'm dying! Nobody embroiders handkerchiefs even in villages nowadays.

Mansur: You would have done it, Gulfira.

Almandar: That's right! She would have embroidered it. If I would have been seriously in love, I would ... I would have twisted a rope of sand!

Messenger of Death: So where is your rope then?

Almandar: What rope?

Messenger of Death: You have never been in love?

Almandar: Oh, that's what you are talking about. I am not a fool to twist a rope of sand. I can't write with pitchforks on water. I didn't twist ropes. But when Iskandar was born, I made such a beautiful cradle. Before, I had never held an axe in my hands. But it was not just a cradle. It was a nightingale's nest.

Gulfira: Mansur... You... Why don't you... don't you say that you love?

Mansur: You would say that you don't love me...

Gulfira: I will think first.

Mansur (*embracing Gulfira*): I love you, Gulfira.

Almandar (*doesn't knowing what to do with joy*): Kiss each other quickly. What's wrong about it?

Messenger of Death: Be quiet, Almandar. (*having seen that Gulfira and Mansur are kissing*) I wish I were a human being.

Gulfira (*moving away from Mansur*): Is it true, Mansur?

Mansur (*shouts with all his might*): I love! I lo-o-o-ve!

Gulfira: What are you doing, silly boy!

Mansur (*sings*):

I would have combed your curls
With a comb from Ufa
My heart is breaking

With just once glance of yours
I have found a comb from Ufa
By a river, by the Agidel
You have tied all my thoughts
To you for all my life.

Gulfira: What are you doing, Mansur? People will hear you!

Mansur: There's no one here, Gulfira. There are only two of us in this world.

Almandar (*shouts for Gulfira and Mansur to hear him*): And me? Where will you put me? Here I am, a witness!

Mansur and Gulfira disappear having heard him. Almandar stands up to his full height:

And me? I am here, in this world! I'm alive! Go away, Messenger of Death. Go away for some time! Yeah! (*Walks about the orchard singing a song of Mansur.*)

Who has combed your curls
With a comb from Ufa?
They say that life is hard
But who has lifted it?
I lost a comb from Ufa
When I was about to comb the curls...

Ommia enters the orchard. She looks at Almandar in surprise. Almandar continues to sing and comes closer to her with his hands on his hips.

How beautiful is the homeland
And how hard is life in a foreign country.

Ommia: Are you mad? You were not at home. They said that you had gone to Antonovka. When have you come back?

Almandar: Sing with me, daughter-in-law.

Ommia: Forgive me, Allah! (*Goes away almost running.*)

Almandar: You, cad! (*Goes to his hut and murmurs.*). She does not have zest for life. They are so young, but they fall asleep with hens. I wish I were twenty years my younger. (*Sits down on the floor of the hut.*) Thirty years my younger. Forty... Fifty... Sixty... Seventy...

Yuzumbike appears from behind the apple-trees with a yoke on her shoulders. She resembles Gulfira with her face and voice. But her clothes are different.

Almandar: Yuzumbike!

Yuzumbike (*stops and covers her face with a kerchief*): Who's that?

Almandar: It's me, Yuzumbike, Almandar.

Yuzumbike: What are you doing here at the bridge?

Almandar: I am guarding the Moon.

Yuzumbike: The moon? Can someone steal the moon? It is so far away. No one can reach it.

Almandar: I mean the Moon on the Earth. I am guarding the Moon with a yoke on her shoulders and a pair of buckets, Yuzumbike.

Yuzumbike: Do you mean me?

Almandar: Are you the moon?

Yuzumbike: Chatterbox. Go away. Don't sit on my way.

Almandar: What if I won't? What will you do?

Yuzumbike: I will throw you off to water.

Almandar: And then you will pick me up and hang me on a rope to dry?

Yuzumbike (*laughing*): You, probably, are a fool! Sitting here on the bridge at night.

Almandar: But you went for water at night too. You were not afraid.

Yuzumbike: I don't have time at daytime.

Almandar: Neither do I.

Yuzumbike: My father praises you. He says you work for ten. He saw you mowing.

Almandar: I have the chance then.

Yuzumbike: What chance?

Almandar: If I ask in marriage, your father will not object.

Yuzumbike: My father does not like matchmakers. He says his daughters should choose their husbands they love.

Almandar: It's even better. We will marry in autumn then.

Yuzumbike: I'm not going to marry you.

Almandar: Why?

Yuzumbike: You are so strange. You cannot be trusted. You wink at all girls in the village.

Almandar: There is a secret here, Yuzumbike. It may seem that I wink at other girls, but in fact I look at them with just one eye, and I feast my both eyes on you.

Yuzumbike: Why are looking at me so?

Almandar: The other girls are like sheep. They walk in flock. Afraid of their own shadow. You are the only one who, like a young beautiful she-goat, walks alone in the middle of the road.

Yuzumbike: That is what my father asked me to do. He says, «Allah did not give me sons. So let my daughters be brave. I will not allow anyone to offend them».

Almandar: That is why they call you a lad?

Yuzumbike: I don't care.

Almandar: Come, sit down next to me, Yuzumbike.

Yuzumbike: What for?

Almandar: We will look at a water-spirit combing her hair.

Yuzumbike: What if someone sees us?

Almandar: But you are not afraid of anyone, aren't you?

Yuzumbike: I'm not afraid when I'm alone.

Almandar: Let someone just try to say a word, and I will show him... Why are you laughing?

Yuzumbike: You are not malicious.

Almandar: You like the malicious?

Yuzumbike: No, I don't. Nobody likes malicious people. (*Sits down onto the ground of the hut, far from Almandar.*)

A pause.

Almandar: Do you know why the Moon shines so brightly, Yuzumbike?

Yuzumbike: No, I don't, Almandar.

Almandar: It's because the clouds move and polish it.

Yuzumbike laughs with pleasure.

Do you know why stars twinkle?

Yuzumbike: No, I don't.

Almandar: There is a beautiful girl, like a picture, sitting on the bridge, and they narrow their eyes to see who's she.

Yuzumbike: Silly boy!

A pause.

Almandar, will the moon be shining so brightly as it is now when we grow old?

Almandar: No.

Yuzumbike: And how will it be shining then?

Almandar: I will get it and nail it on the roof of our house.

Yuzumbike: Don't say so, Almandar. The others also need the Moon.

Almandar: All right, I will not touch it. Let it hang.

Yuzumbike: Shall we grow old, Almandar?

Almandar: Only the unhappy grow old.

Yuzumbike: Shall we die, Almandar?

Almandar: Can you find another subject?

Yuzumbike: What should we talk about?

Almandar: Only the unhappy die.

Yuzumbike: You can't evade what has been directed by Allah.

Almandar: I don't know what is written there. I can't read.

Yuzumbike: Don't say so, Almandar.

Almandar: Why are you talking as if you are a wife of a mullah? Churtu-Matyr...

Yuzumbike: What does it mean 'churtu-matyr'?

Almandar: My father learned it from Russian men in Antonovka. They say it when they get angry.

Yuzumbike: Don't get angry, Almandar. Don't say these words to me.

Almandar: Don't drive me mad, and I will not say them.

A voice of a cock is heard.

Yuzumbike (*raises*): The dawn is coming, the cocks are singing.

Goes to the side from which she has come. Almandar is laughing.

Yuzumbike (*turns to him*): Why are you laughing, Almandar?

Almandar: You forgot to fill the buckets.

Yuzumbike: Then let me pass.

Almandar: Try to pass me by.

Yuzumbike: The bridge is narrow, I will fall.

Almandar: I will hold you.

Yuzumbike: Oh!

Almandar: Coward.

Yuzumbike: You coward. (*Steps onto the floor of the hut.*) Don't touch me with your hands. All right?

Goes on the floor. Almandar stands on the edge. Giving the way to Yuzumbike, he stands on one foot.

Almandar: Take water quickly. My foot got tired.

Voice of Yuzumbike: Don't romp or you will fall.

Right after these words Almandar sways and stands onto two feet. Ommia and Iskandar enter the orchard.

Ommia: Look with your own eyes.

Almandar: I'm careful, Yuzumbike, I'm careful.

Iskandar (*comes closer to Almandar*): Father...

Almandar (*looks narrowly at Iskandar*): Son? Is that you?

Iskandar: It's me, father.

Almandar: I was just talking to your mother.

Ommia: What next!

Almandar: Daughter-in-law? You here too?

Ommia (*with fear*): Here, father, here.

Almandar: Don't be angry, daughter-in-law.

Ommia: I'm not angry, father. I'm not angry.

Almandar: I have never offended you with a rude word. And, I swore at you as between friends, loving you.

Ommia: Yes, father, yes...

Almandar: Well, my dear... You talk so sweet. Just like a nightingale. You've been hiding these abilities for forty years from me.

Iskandar: Father, let's go into the house.

Almandar: Swearing at me gave you pleasure, daughter-in-law? Your slow-witted husband cannot say three words at once. But a woman needs to talk. Is that right, daughter-in-law?

Ommia: True, father, true. (*whispering to Iskandar*): We need to inform the children.

Almandar: What are you talking about, daughter-in-law?

Ommia: Praising you, father.

Almandar: That's right, daughter-in-law. Or... Come, sit closer. (*sits onto the ground of the hut*) Son, you sit on my right hand and you, daughter-in-law, on my left hand.

Ommia: We will, father. Of course, we will.

They sit down. Ommia tries to sit farther.

Almandar: Closer, daughter-in-law, closer. That's right. It's dawning, my children. Do you see? Soon the sun will rise. (*to Iskandar*) Why are you so lightly dressed? It's chilly at this time in the street. (*Takes off his jacket and puts onto Iskandar's shoulders.*)

Ommia: Father, what is aching?

Almandar: My soul is not in its place. It flies as a bird.

Ommia: I see... Do you know where you are and what you are doing?

Almandar: Daughter-in-law, go and call Hamdebanu.

Ommia: Hamdebanu? She's probably sleeping.

Almandar: Who sleeps at dawn?

Ommia: Everybody. You should lie too... You will feel better.

Almandar: Do as you are told.

Ommia: Iskandar, what should I do?

Iskandar: Go and call her.

Ommia: Oh, Allah.... (*Murmuring something, she goes to the wicket and meets Gulfira and Mansur.*). Where are you going at this time? Granddad Almandar...

Gulfira: What's happened?

Ommia: It happened... He is not all there. Go and call grandma Hamdebanu.

Gulfira: Why?

Ommia: You know it. He wants to get married. I'm dying! Makes a laughing stock of us. That's how it can be if you don't die at the right time. Go and call her. Let him be happy for a while.

Almandar: Daughter-in-law, do not reassign my request to you.

Ommia: I'm dying! He hears everything. Oh, Allah... (*goes away*).

Gulfira (*runs to the orchard to Almandar*): Granddad...

Almandar: And where's our beloved?

Gulfira: Granddad...

Almandar: Go and call him.

Gulfira: There's no one there.

Almandar: Call him.

Gulfira goes to the wicket and calls Mansur. Mansur approaches Almandar timidly.

Almandar: Why are you standing there as if you have stolen something?

Mansur: How do you do, granddad Almandar. How do you do, granddad Iskandar.

Almandar: In good health. Can it be different? How did you say it? There are only two of us in this world? You said well, fine fellow. If you let someone third between you, I will tear off your ears. Here, Iskandar, is the fiance of your granddaughter. Did you know that?

Iskandar: Father....

Almandar: There was no need to say. I know who I am talking to. (*to Gulfira*) You look very much like your great-grandma. If Allah so wishes, you will be as happy as she was. Come, sit next to me. And you, fiance... Your name is Mansur, isn't it?

Mansur: Mansur.

Almandar: And you also have a brother, Ilsur?

Mansur: Yes, I have.

Almandar: Where is he?

Mansur: I think he is sleeping.

Almandar: Bring him here.

Mansur: Here?

Almandar: If I tell you, probably, here, then.

Gulfira: Granddad...

Almandar: If you fail to wake him up, take him here. Go, my dear, go. Man does not make himself to be begged.

Mansur goes away.

Iskandar: Father, let's come home.

Almandar: I have called guests to the orchard. Should I myself go to the house then? Will it be right, daughter?

Gulfira: Granddad, you are pretending to be ill, aren't you?

Almandar: What did you say?

Gulfira: You are just joking, aren't you?

Almandar: Your granddad has been joking his all life, daughter.

Hamdebanu and Ommia near the wicket.

Ommia: What can we do, Hamdebanu? He has never been witty, and now he has lost the remains of his wit. It's a shame,but what can we do?

Hamdebanu: Let's not think of the bad.

Almandar: Why don't you come in, Hamdebanu?

Hamdebanu: Coming, uncle Almandar, coming.

Comes to the hut together with Ommia.

Almandar: You slept, Hamdebanu?

Hamdebanu: No, uncle Almandar, I woke up already.

Almandar: Cannot sleep long alone? The same with me.

Hamdebanu: You will, if Allah so wishes.

Almandar: Say we will, Hamdebanu.

Hamdebanu: Oh, Allah...

Ommia: Exactly...

Almandar: So, you say you won't marry me, Hamdebanu, don't you?

Hamdebanu: I will, uncle Almandar, I will.

Almandar: Who will you marry?

Hamdebanu: What do you mean? Oh, Allah... I will, when you will recover.

Almandar: Am I ill?

Hamdebanu: No, uncle Almandar, Allah forbid!

Almandar (*Starts laughing. Then having stopped laughing*): Well, daughter-in-law. You don't know how to show that your father-in-law is ill. I'm not ill, Hamdebanu. Healthy as a bull.

Hamdebanu: Of course... Of course, uncle Almandar.

Almandar: Come, sit next to me. Son, move a bit. There's no need for you to listen to the young ones cooing. Sit, Hamdebanu, sit closer. Don't be afraid, I will not touch you.

Hamdebanu: Yes, uncle Almandar. What should I be afraid of?

Almandar: If I touch you by chance, slap me hard in the face as you slapped a bull calf of Zakir from the lower part of the village. Remember? You became a widow when you were 25 and you did not allow anyone to approach you. Alone, all the time. A stubborn woman you are, Hamdebanu. I tried to find you a husband many times for your youth not to pass away in vain, without a family. I asked you to marry me, but you swore at me. Thank you, Hamdebanu. You insisted on your standpoint and did not insult the memory of your husband. If I were at the Government, I would have awarded medals to women like you, Hamdebanu, for their spirit. Can you hear me, Gulfira?

Evstigney appears in the orchard from the side of the house.

Evstigney: Almandar, ah, Almandar!

Almandar: I'm here, Yastegney!

Evstigney (*comes to the hut*): Shaitan you are, Almandar. Why have you run away? I come out to orchard and you are not there. I was surprised. I have found the foreman and convinced him to give me a horse. I said to him that I needed to go to Almandar. I said to him that Almandar run away. I came here. Entered the house, and you are not there. Then I hear your voice in the orchard.

Almandar: Sit down, Yastegney. We are sitting and talking here. My son, daughter-in-law, granddaughter, Hamdebanu. The day is coming. The Sun is coming.

Evstigney (*to the others*): How do you do.

Ommia (*speaks Russian with Tatar accent*): How do you do, Yastegney-dadai. Don't listen to the old man. Give him a punch. He goes to orchard alone, sings songs. (*having seen that Gulfira is laughing*). What are you laughing at?

Iskandar: If you can't speak Russian, Ommia, better be silent.

Ommia: Only you all are Jacks-of-all-trades.

Evstigney: It's all right, daughter-in-law. (*sits by Almandar*). How did you come here? I was worrying about you.

Almandar: It's all right, Yastegney. In an orchard, in a garden. Thank you.

Mansur comes in with sleeping Ilsur on his hands. He tries to wake the boy up.

Mansur: Wake up! (*rubs Ilsur's ears*) Come on!

Ilsurs wards off.

Almandar: Quieter! Don't touch a child.

Mansur: But he does not wake up.

Puts Ilsur on the ground. The boy sits down on the ground and rubs his eyes.

Almandar: Is this the way to wake up? (*knees before Ilsur*). Want to sleep, eh? The dream is so sweet. Sleep, sleep. (*Ilsur opens his eyes and looks at Almandar.*) Recognised me? It's me. Want a candy?

Ilsur: No.

Almandar: Shall we bring you honey?

Ilsur: No.

Almandar: Apples?

Ilsur: No.

Ommia: Don't tease the child.

Almandar: Ilsur, I'm going away.

Ilsur: Where?

Almandar: Far away. And I will not come back.

Ilsur: Don't go.

Almandar: If you wake up, I will not.

Ilsur: I don't sleep.

Almandar: Good boy! Sing me something.

Ilsur: I don't want to.

Almandar: You don't mind if I sing then?

Ilsur: Sing.

Almandar (*speaks without singing*):

We are such braves
Such and such braves:
Our heads are not fish
They will not fry and eat them,

Ilsur (*smiles*): It's wrong.

Almandar: What's correct?

Ilsur: You know, but just pretend that you don't.

Almandar: No. I forgot. That's why I called for you.

Ilsur: Joking?

Almandar: No jokes!

Ilsur (*also without melody*)

We are such braves
Such and such braves:
We fit for everything
We are not a rusty piece of metal.

Almandar: Good boy! Now, sing.

Ilsur: Give me an apple.

Almandar: An apple? I will. Take any one — any one yourself.

Ilsur: No. You give.

Almandar: Myself? Just a moment, just a moment... (*Picks apples from the nearest apple-tree and puts them by feet of Ilsur.*) Here... Enough?

Ilsur: Enough. (*Sings*)

We are such braves
Such and such braves:
We fit for everything
We are not a rusty piece of metal.

Almandar notices Messenger of Death behind the apple-tree.

Almandar: Well, Ilsur. Let's sing another one: «Shyrdyi».

Ilsur: I sing: byrdyi

Byrdyi, byrdyi and shyrdyi
I sing, but you don't like it
Then try to sing something like this.

While Ilsur is singing, Almandar comes to Messenger of Death. Takes a paper from his hands and signs it on the back of Messenger of Death. Repeating the last two lines goes to the hut.

Lights go off.

EPILOGUE

Decorations are the same as in Prologue and Interlude. From one side comes out Angel of Death, and Messenger of Death from the other.

Angel of Death: Where's Almandar?

Messenger of Death (*extends his hand with the paper*): Here. The order is fulfilled. Just as you wanted.

Angel of Death: Where's he himself?

Messenger of Death: In the reception.

Angel of Death: Bring him here.

From the reception heard is the scream of the secretary. Secretary dashes onto the stage.

Angel of Death: What's up?

Secretary (*coquettishly*): He's embracing me.

Angel of Death: Who?

Secretary: An old man.

Messenger of Death: Not an old man. Almandar. Almandar from Aldermesh.

From the reception is heard a song «Shyrdyi».

Curtain falls.

THE END

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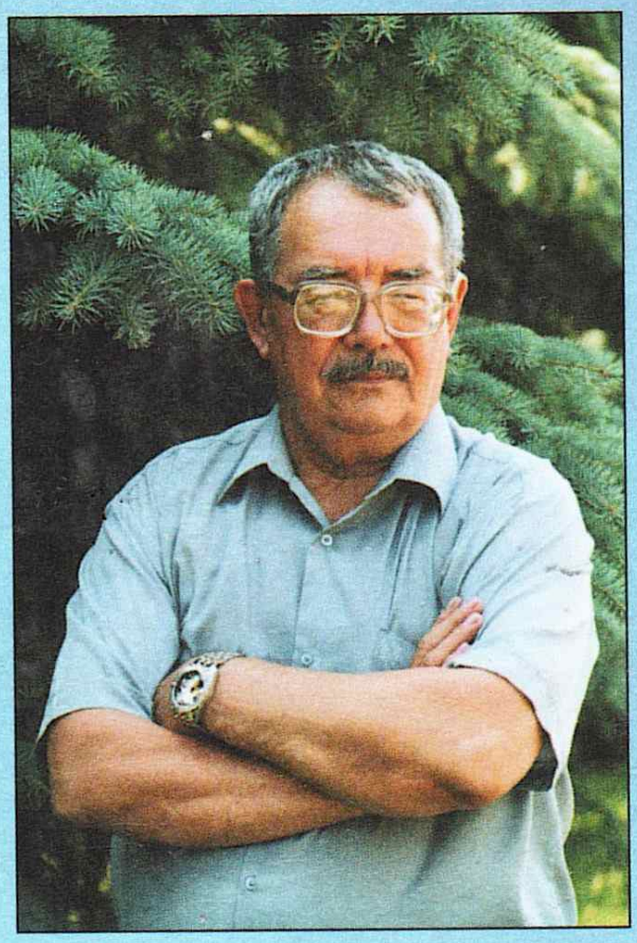
Отпечатано в типографии ОАО ПИК «Идел-Пресс».
420066, г. Казань, ул. Декабристов, 2.



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